

Interactive Online Distance Learning at the University of Hawai'i-West O'ahu

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From its beginnings 25 years ago, the University of Hawai'i-West O'ahu (UH-West O'ahu) has strived to provide its students, mostly working adults with an average age of 32 years, with easy access to classes and advising by maintaining flexible class schedules and office hours. When UH-West O'ahu initiated a distance education program in 1981, the first courses were delivered in person to students on Maui and Kaua'i, with faculty traveling to those islands on weekends. The result was a program that encouraged collaborative student work and allowed students extensive contact with faculty. As distance learning classes were converted to a format for interactive television in the late 1990's, care was taken to ensure that the program continued to provide students with the same level of access to UH-West O'ahu faculty, who made frequent trips to the neighbor islands to meet personally with students. When an online program was introduced in academic year 1999-2000, UH-West O'ahu held fast to the same standards of academic excellence, personalized instruction and commitment to student participation. The institutional model that has emerged as a result of the collaborative efforts of the campus community assures UH-West O'ahu's continued commitment to these values.

Interactive Online Distance Learning Model

UH-West O'ahu's signature online instructional model is a multi-media approach delivered through WebCT, a course management system. The model was first used at UH-West O'ahu by Dr. Susan Pelowski, Associate Professor of Psychology, who was searching for an online vehicle that would allow her to teach using her own voice, graphics and images. She also wanted technological tools that would facilitate student responses to the material. The resultant model, modified through collaboration with UH-West O'ahu faculty from other disciplines, includes streaming media for lecture presentations, as well as chat sessions and asynchronous discussions for class interaction.

Streaming Media/Power Point/ Narrated Lecture Presentations

Weekly lectures are converted into Power Point presentations—bulleted text often accompanied by graphics, pictures or video clips. Presentations are narrated by the instructor and published using RealMedia. Streaming media presentations are then posted on specific dates on the WebCT calendar. When students click on the hypertext of a particular date, the RealAudio plays the narrated lectures for that week. Students value being able to hear the voice of the lecturer. These RealMedia presentations maintain the personalized approach that has been a distinguishing feature of UH-West O'ahu's distance education programs. The model also permits maximum flexibility, and although the presentations are posted only on certain dates, students have the option of accessing the lessons at any time or day. Indeed, they may return to the RealOne presentations whenever they wish. In addition, instructors may post the lectures in text form so students have easy access to the information. Students highly value these conveniences.

Online Chats and Asynchronous Discussion

To encourage communication among students, many of the instructors of online courses at UH-West O'ahu require students to attend periodic chat sessions to discuss lectures and readings. Some faculty believe it is important to arrange weekly chat sessions; others believe that online courses, as much as possible, should be neither space-bound nor time-bound and that two chat sessions per week does not offer enough flexibility for students. Faculty, nevertheless, agree that chat sessions are effective in promoting participatory learning, and they offer such sessions several times during the semester to fit the schedules of the students. For example, instructors often require students to attend one of several chat sessions scheduled during any given week. This approach usually means that the sessions are smaller and more manageable than they would be with a full class, allowing for greater level of participation by chat room members.

These varied uses of chat sessions allow the faculty to deliver online courses that are highly interactive and to foster what one student describes as “a spirit of community among the students.” Another student comments: “Even though this was an Internet class, I truly believe I was closer to my peers and my instructor than in a regular classroom.”

Weekly lecture presentations are also augmented with class discussions—facilitated through asynchronous bulletin board discussions and private e-mail. Instructors use the discussion board to conduct full class discussions and smaller, private group discussions. In the latter case, students are divided into small groups and asked to read, edit, and revise drafts of each other’s papers, much as they would conduct peer-editing sessions in a face-to-face class. Group work of this kind is especially employed in writing courses and writing-intensive classes at UH-West O’ahu.

Small group on-line discussions are also used for writing assignments in which students work together on a research project and present it to the rest of the class. Students in online public administration courses, for example, are assigned to private groups that must research topics related to the course readings and then prepare reports to be presented in chat sessions. In the online section of *Humanities 310, Writing Skills*, a course required of all incoming UH-West O’ahu students who have not successfully completed the Writing Assessment Examination, the culminating assignment is a collaborative research paper. Groups of four to six students, selected because they share a similar academic discipline, are asked to collaborate on a paper. In preparing these papers, group members participate in numerous asynchronous discussions to determine the topic of their paper, prepare a thesis and outline, share sources of information, revise and edit each other’s contributions, piece the paper together, and proofread the final draft. They are free to engage in chat sessions whenever they wish.

In another online class, a writing-intensive literature course, students are assigned to small groups to discuss a particular topic and write a paragraph on it. One group may be asked to focus on the alliterative patterns in a certain poem; another group, to explain the significance of a particular symbol; yet another, to determine the main theme of the poem.

Members of the group begin by discussing their

topic. One member, designated as writer/facilitator, then takes the group’s discussion notes to draft a paragraph. Others in the group revise and edit the paragraph and post it, at the end of the week, on the main, public discussion forum for everyone in the class to read. The following week, students are assigned to new groups, and new group facilitators/writers are designated. Using this process over an entire semester, gives everyone about three chances to act as a facilitator/writer. This method also allows students to collaborate with everyone else in the class. Asynchronous, ongoing group discussions offer time for reflection and yield valuable literary insights. Furthermore, in working towards the end product—a well crafted, unified, cohesive, and well-developed paragraph—students gain essential skills in writing about literature.

All instruction in written communication at UH-West O’ahu is supported by the Writing Center. Faculty who teach courses using WebCT create a link to the UH-West O’ahu Writing Center at <http://homepages.uhwo.hawaii.edu/~writing/>. The Center provides students with access to online tutoring in writing, economics, and statistics. Thus by visiting the Writing Center online students have at their fingertips a convenient means of seeking additional help with their writing. Students trained as writing assistants are also assigned to specific online classes, such as writing skills classes, writing-intensive classes, and a course entitled “Methods and Techniques in Social Science Research” that requires a good deal of student writing. Writing assistants, experienced in providing online help, support the instructors by taking part in peer group work and by offering suggestions and comments on drafts of papers. Tutors in economics and statistics are also available to help out with online class discussions and group work.

Faculty Involvement

The sense of collaboration fostered in UH-West O’ahu’s online courses is also a central component in the development of the institution’s distance education program. Almost all 23 full-time instructional faculty have been involved in the distance education program at some level. To date, 20 faculty members (87%), have participated in the distance-learning program; by Fall 2003, that number should rise to 22 (97%). As of Spring 2002, 13 of the full-time instruc-

tional faculty (57%) will have taught or will be teaching online courses; by Fall 2003, 15 full-time, instructional faculty (65%) are expected to have developed and taught online courses.

Faculty members do not design their courses in isolation. For example, after Dr. Pelowski created her first online course in Fall 1999, she advised two other faculty members who were developing online courses. The result is a collaborative loop that includes faculty members from UH-West O'ahu's three academic divisions—Humanities, Professional Studies, and Social Sciences. As additional faculty began developing online courses for the BA degree in Social Sciences (BASS), they displayed a similar eagerness to share pedagogical techniques and learn about the potential inherent in online teaching.

One outcome of this collaboration is that UH-West O'ahu has started a series of online workshops for faculty, administrators, staff, and students. In Fall 2001, faculty and support staff presented three workshops. In Spring 2002, faculty from all three academic divisions combined to deliver six workshops on such topics as managing an effective online discussion, running an effective chat session, using the quiz and grade functions of WebCT, and teaching writing-intensive classes online.

Another example of fruitful collaborative efforts is the creation of a UH-West O'ahu Orientation to WebCT Online Courses. This Orientation consists of various modules designed to acquaint students and other interested parties in the components of a typical UH-West O'ahu online course. The effort was a joint project of faculty and support staff. Instructions on how to take the Orientation are listed in the syllabi and on the web pages of all faculty teaching online courses. Before accessing the Orientation, students are requested to consult a handbook—"Creating My WebCT Account," located at <http://www2.hawaii.edu/%7Euhwolab/webct.html>.

The Orientation begins with a 17-minute narrated streaming media presentation that lists the computer requirements necessary for taking an online course. It also explains various functions of a typical WebCT course and gives the first part of an extended assignment in which students are asked to explore different functions of the Orientation home page. The Orientation ends with a short, multiple-choice quiz, which students must successfully complete before they are allowed to take their first WebCT online course. A

broad representation of interested parties attended a demonstration of the Orientation on the UH-West O'ahu campus, and suggested ways to improve it.

Institutional Support and Commitment

The institutional commitment to develop an integrated and innovative online program is especially noteworthy given the lack of human resources available. First of all, UH-West O'ahu does not employ any full-time technical support person for faculty developing and teaching online courses. Furthermore, the institution is not even certain if any part-time assistance will be available after Spring 2002. The position of Coordinator of Distributed Learning, established in Spring 2002, is also part-time, with a full-time faculty member receiving one-course reduction to fulfill the duties of the position. UH-West O'ahu also does not have sufficient faculty to represent a broad higher education curriculum while, at the same time, developing an online program.

The adverse effect the online program is having on other academic programs is already evident. For instance, the number of writing-intensive courses offered to the student body at the Pearl City campus has dwindled because faculty who would have been teaching writing-intensive courses to students from O'ahu are now delivering them online to students who mostly reside on the neighbor islands. If this trend continues, the institution will not be able to offer enough required writing-intensive courses to meet student demand. Without more faculty and support staff, the online program will also be compromised. In recognition of these problems, the UH-West O'ahu administration has requested funds for full-time positions for its online program. The administration has also been conscientious in providing the necessary financial support from available funds. Several years ago, the faculty senate resolved that faculty would receive either three credits of release time or the equivalent in overload pay to prepare any new online course. Chancellor William Pearman has adhered to that policy and offered faculty the financial incentive necessary to develop a successful online program. This financial incentive, coupled with institutional tenure and promotion guidelines that reward faculty for developing web-based instructional programs, is a major reason that UH-West O'ahu's success in this area. Release time and overload pay are important

incentives that have helped to nurture UH-West O'ahu's online program developments while the institution remains committed to the principles of student participation and easy access.

In the brief space of two years, the faculty of this upper-division institution has created 22 online courses. It has also helped to develop two degree programs via distance education—the BASS degree, which, at the upper-division level, is almost completely online for students transferring to UH-West O'ahu, and the BA degree in Business Administration (BABA), which is approximately 50% online. In addition, a certificate program, the Certificate in Substance Abuse and Addictions Studies, is offered online. In comparison UH-Mānoa offers two partial online degrees—the BA in Information and Computer Sciences and the BA in Liberal Studies—and two certificate programs—the Certificate in Telecommunication and Information Resource Management and the Certificate in Travel Industry and Management. The Certificate in Database Management is offered by UH-Hilo. Thus, UH-West O'ahu offers 33% of the online BA degree programs and 25% of the online certificate programs system-wide, a considerable achievement given its limited resources.

If the incentives for faculty continue and if the institution is able to receive adequate technical and administrative support, UH-West O'ahu's online programs will continue to expand. By the end of academic year 2003-2004, the upper-division credits for a BASS degree will be almost totally online. More of the courses in the BABA degree should also be online. By Spring 2003, the institution is scheduled to have at least nine more online courses, bringing the total number to 30. In addition, the UH-West O'ahu Writing Center will expand its online program by offering tutoring in accounting. Furthermore, the UH-West O'ahu distance education web site will be updated and revised.

In an address (January 2002) delivered to the Pan Pacific Distance Learning Association, Dr. Rose Tseng, Chancellor at UH-Hilo and former Chair of the UH Task Force on Technology and Distance Education, stated that five factors are necessary for a successful system-wide distance education endeavor: (1) vision, (2) institutional support, (3) faculty commitment and recognition, (4) collaborative team efforts, and (5) a lot of creativity and hard work. Dr. Tseng's formula for success is an accurate description of the elements that

have contributed to the creation of the infrastructure for the delivery of UH-West O'ahu's online programs. Faculty and administration enjoy a shared vision and have built on their experiences in providing distance education since 1981, to deliver the best online instruction possible. The creation of this labor-intensive and successful institutional model is due in large measure to the financial incentives provided by the UH-West O'ahu administration, to the recognition of this work in the guidelines for promotion and tenure, and to the efforts of the faculty. In addition, members of all segments of the campus have combined their creativity and energy to help UH-West O'ahu emerge as a leader in online learning.

References

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Footnote: ¹ Figures from the UH Institutional Research Office show that in Fall 2000, the full-time instructional faculty at numbered 1,117 at UH-Mānoa and 153 at UH-Hilo.

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